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ABSTRACT

Methods for teaching the ethics of psychological research to students were surveyed by a committee of the American Psychological Association (The Committee for the Protection of Human Participants in Research). A survey of department chairpersons was conducted to determine how many departments had formal courses on ethical issues. The majority of respondents were general psychology departments and two-thirds offered Ph.D.s. Fifty percent of the departments had an internal research review committee to determine the presence or absence of a formal system of reviewing departmental research. Undergraduate courses on ethics in psychology were offered by 3.7 percent of the departments, while 7.4 percent offered graduate courses on research ethics. Seventy percent of the departments who offered the courses made them a requirement. General courses on ethics in psychology were offered by 44.4 percent of the departments. These courses spent about 10 to 20 percent of the course time on research ethics. Research methods courses were also found to address research ethics. For the survey sample, the findings indicate there are a small group of programs that are heavily committed to teaching ethics. It is concluded that informal methods are the most common method of transmitting research ethics in psychology. (SW)

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Teaching Research Ethics: Methods and Practice

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The notion of teaching the ethics of psychological research to our students in a formalized manner is relatively new. While concern about the welfare of research participants has always been considered part of the research process, it was only 12 years ago that APA developed a set of ethical principles guiding research with humans. Furthermore, it was in 1978, only six years ago, that APA established a standing committee designed to focus on ethical issues in psychological research with human participants. It is interesting to note that the CARE Committee, responsible for overseeing ethical issues in animal research, was established in 1925. Thus, focusing explicitly on the importance of ethical behavior is a relatively recent development. This is not to say that psychologists were not concerned with ethical issues prior to these formal guidelines. Instead the point that I am making is that they were handled informally in a less structured manner on an issue by issue basis as questions or problems arose. While we as an organization have now developed a formal means of dealing with ethical issues in human research, it appears that our methods for teaching the ethics of research remains largely informal.

In an effort to determine what exactly the current practices for teaching research ethics are, the Committee for the Protection of Human Participants in Research conducted a survey of psychology departments. We sent our survey to department chairpersons and received a fairly good response with 50% returning our questionnaires. Our survey was quite brief and principally designed to let us know how many departments have formal courses on Ethical Issues.

In looking at who responded to our survey, we found that the majority were general psychology departments with two-thirds of them offering Ph.D.s We asked the chairpersons whether or not their department had an internal research review committee to determine the presence or absence of a formal system of reviewing departmental research. We found a split on this question with 50% of the departments having an internal review.

In looking at the actual teaching practices, we found that 3.7% or 12 departments offered an undergraduate course on ethics in psychology. That number doubled when we looked at how many departments offered graduate courses on research ethics. Thus 7.4% of the programs had specific graduate courses on research ethics. It is interesting to note that although only 24 departments offered research ethics courses, 70% of those who offered the courses made them a requirement.

In looking at general courses on Ethics in Psychology, we found that 44.4% of the departments offered such a course. Over ninety percent (91.3%) had this course as a requirement. In looking at the course, the average amount of time spent on research ethics ranged from about 10-20% of the course time. The majority of the remaining time was spent on ethics for the practitioner. Although we don't have this information, we could speculate that these general ethics courses, although required are probably required for clinical and counseling students. This would account for the small proportion of time spent on research ethics and the large proportion on practitioner issues. This may leave us with a situation where those likely to devote themselves to research careers as in the case of social psychologists are not taking these courses and thus, are without formal training. Finally, we asked if ethical issues in research were covered in some other course and we found that that was the case in over 2/3 of the departments (69.1%) with a Research Methods course being the course most frequently cited as where the teaching took place. On the average, 2-6 classroom hours were spent on ethical issues. Finally when asked whether the departments had plans to increase their ethics teaching, 13.6% replied affirmatively. Thus, only a small number of programs anticipate changing their practices with regard to teaching research ethics.

Now, what is it that our findings are telling us? I think we can draw a few conclusions.

The first is that, while APA has chosen to develop a formal system by way of the Ethical Principles and the Ethics Committees, this formalized system has

not been adopted by Psychology Departments by and large in their teaching of research ethics. Informal transmission remains the most common method. I am not sure if this is good or bad but it is clear that departments don't feel that there is a pressing need to address research ethics in formal coursework.

Secondly, our findings show there are a small group of programs that are heavily committed to teaching ethical issues. These programs offer specific courses on research ethics and frequently make them a requirement. My hunch is that these courses grew from a particular faculty in the department who had an interest in ethics and thus, developed formal coursework.

Finally, I'd like to conclude by saying that it appears that much of what is taught about research ethics is done by an apprenticeship. The students begin working on their own or a faculty member's research, encounter some sort of ethical question and resolve it as it emerges. It seems to me that it may be more effective if we begin to provide students with the necessary tools to resolve these questions in a more systematized manner.